What Makes A Good Web Feature?

- Not a press release
- Answers "Why should I care?" or "What's the cool factor?"
- Compelling "hook" to draw readers in
- Clear, conversational tone to keep them
- Compelling images and multimedia to invite them to go deeper

Remember The Audience

- Portal Mission: "To reflect the public view of NASA rather than the agency's view of itself."

- Step away from the material if you're "too close" -- forget where you work.

- A good trick: Write as if you're explaining it to your spouse, your relatives, or someone you've just met on the street.

Do:

- Write like you talk. Don't fear contractions or personal pronouns.
- Use simple language: *used* not *utilized*, *happened* not *occurred*.
- Use short, declarative sentences.
- Use quotes, especially in a feature focusing on a person.

Do:

•Use transitions to guide the reader along. Create expectations, then meet them.

•Use comparisons, contrasts, metaphors and examples. Use something they do understand to explain something they don't.

•Ask simple, basic questions of the experts.

•Tell them you're starting, and know how to stop. A good closing often references the beginning.

Don’t:

- Write in the passive voice.
- Use acronyms if you can help it. If you must, explain them and then try to refer to "the program" or "the spacecraft."
- Use jargon, as in "The Expedition 8 *increment* is *on orbit* at *Station*."
- Weigh down your sentences with multiple, complex clauses. The reader shouldn't have to read it twice.
- Make a grocery list – as in "this happened and then this happened, followed by this and this and then this."

Thoughts On Better Web Writing

- You've got to answer two questions in the first paragraph, preferably the first sentence -- "Why is this cool?" and "Why do I care?" Often the answer to both questions is the same. People who come to nasa.gov are by nature enthusiastic about the agency's work, and our writing should reflect that same enthusiasm back to them. Don't just give the technical details of a new discovery; point out how it may change people's lives. Try to approach the material with a sense of wonder, even if you've become very close to it.

- Remember the Audience -- The whole point of the portal is to reflect the public view of NASA rather than the agency's view of itself. Don't assume Web feature readers know the material as well as press release readers (media, science community). A good trick is to write as if you were explaining the material to your spouse, your relatives, or someone you've just met on the street.

- In that same vein, try to be as conversational as possible. Write like you talk. Don't be afraid of the occasional contraction, despite what your grammar teacher told you. For example, don't use words like "occurred" or "utilized" when you can use "happened" or "used."

- Passive vs. Active -- Passive voice has its uses, but for the most part, active voice is much stronger and easier on the reader. For example, "President Kennedy challenged NASA to go to the Moon …" instead of "NASA was challenged by President Kennedy to go to the Moon."

- A compelling lead is crucial. Readers, especially Web readers, are pretty impatient, browsing for something to grab their interest. That first sentence is your only chance to pull them in. So whenever possible, keep it short and leave them wanting more. Use a question or a play on words, and try to step away from the copy and ask yourself, "would I want to keep reading this?" Sometimes something as simple as a hard return after the first sentence is enough to provide a little dramatic pause to keep the reader going.

- Try to use short declarative sentences, and avoid stacking up so many clauses and phrases that the point gets lost. A sentence that reads "The xx mission, which launched in 1998 as part of the xxx program run by NASA's xx space center, has passed a milestone as it sent back pictures of xxx, the most distant galaxy ever photographed" may leave the reader thinking "huh?" Better to start by saying the mission has passed a milestone and then explain.

- Acronyms are the cockroaches of language. Squash them mercilessly. Whenever possible, use the general English word that applies. If there's one camera on a satellite, give it its proper name high up in the article -- not necessarily on first reference -- and then refer to it as "the camera" thereafter.

- Quotes can make a dry narrative come alive. Any feature story on a specific person seems incomplete without a quote from the subject. Also, consider the type of quote you use. "Real quotes" from an interview or a question and answer session in a news conference are almost always better than "canned" material written in advance for a "press release." The latter often don't reflect the way people actually talk.

- We all know that this agency is jargon and acronym happy, but we don't have to carry that over into Web writing. If you've got to use an acronym, explain what it is. A good example of jargon would be to write, "The Expedition 8 increment is currently on orbit on Station." People outside of NASA would probably phrase it, "The Expedition 8 crew is orbiting the Earth on board the International Space Station."

- Finally, avoid the "grocery list" approach -- as in "X happened in this year, then Y happened, then Z happened 15 times … A happened next, followed by B, etc." Readers want a story, not a list. Make use of transitional words like "however" and "meanwhile" to break up the list and create a natural flow. Remember that lists of facts can often be turned into tables, which are more easily read. Also individual facts that would otherwise stand by themselves in a paragraph can be converted to a "NASA Fact" and placed in the left-column of a page.

People do not have to be completely identified on first reference if it makes the sentence cumbersome. Too often we feel obligated to say, " . . . said Dr. Jane Smith, principal investigator for the ACRONYM instrument and director of the This, That and The Other Thing directorate and the NASA Particular Center." It's much easier on the reader to refer to "Dr. Jane Smith of the PROGRAM team" on first reference and explain her other affiliations later, if they're germane. Similarly the connection between the SCIENCE CENTER of the UNIVERSITY, funded by the ENTERPRISE and managed by the CENTER, don't all have to be laid out on first reference.

The Tip Sheet:
Suggestions and Examples for Clear Writing

Journalists follow a plan when writing. They often call it the Five Ws and an H: who, what, where, when, why, and how. Taking care to include these elements in an article insures that it's complete. But what about the actual content of the article? Just as important as being complete, an article needs to be written so that readers will find it interesting and understandable. This chapter focuses on the nuts and bolts of writing for a non-technical audience: the tip sheet.

Comparisons, contrasts, metaphors and examples

Trying to visualize an abstract concept is challenging; if the concept is complex as well, it's even harder. Using comparisons and metaphors to draw parallels between a common experience and something unfamiliar help establish a reference point. Imagine trying to describe the following ideas. Using comparisons makes short work of detailed explanations:

- You know how you float out of your seat when a roller coaster zooms down a steep hill? That's how microgravity feels to astronauts.
- The metal is rolled out to ¼-inch thick. That's as thick as two nickels stacked on top of each other.
- If the Earth is the relative size of a baseball, and the sun is as big as a basketball, then the moon would be the size of a marble.
- Imagine a huge slingshot that hurls a rocket into space. That's the idea behind magnetic levitation propulsion.
- How much is a billion? If you could find a goldfish bowl large enough to hold a billion goldfish, it would be the size of a football stadium.

Ask simple, basic questions of the experts

Experts are called experts because they are well versed about a given subject. Sometimes, however, when a person is deeply involved in a project, it can be difficult for them to provide simple explanations that average people can understand. They go into extreme detail, explain side issues that only complicate an already-confusing subject, or use jargon and terminology that confuse the lay audience. When interviewing experts, guiding their responses by asking simple questions helps keep the responses at the appropriate level. It can be helpful to preface the interview with a comment that advises the expert about the technical depth of your needs: "I'm writing for a very non-technical audience, so my information has to be extremely basic and elementary. I am looking for general concepts, rather than detailed descriptions, that can fit into a 500-word article." If you don't inform the experts about your requirements, it will be difficult for them

to provide what you need, especially given that many highly educated professionals write for technical and scholarly publications. When asking those simple questions, don't make assumptions. Start at Square One, explain the basics and then flesh out the information, as the material requires.

Explain it to the next-door neighbor

Assuming a scholarly tone when writing material for non-technical can sometimes produce unnecessarily intimidating and dull documents. If you find your words becoming convoluted and unclear, take a pause. On your word processor screen, type in this phrase: "What I really mean to say is…" and complete that thought. Often this will serve to break through the haze of jargon or techno babble. Jargon is timesaving shorthand shared by people who commonly use that terminology, but for general consumption, it merely confuses the reader.

Readers are the reason we write, claims Michael Bremer, author of *Untechnical Writing: How to Explain Technical Subjects and Products to Anyone.* Bremer asserts, "It's all about the reader." Writing so that readers cannot understand the material is pointless. A well-organized yet highly technical paper might please a professor, but would leave the average reader unimpressed.

Forget where you work

When intellectuals or professionals surround you, you start to sound like them. You adopt their jargon and you understand far more about their work than the average person does. You begin to assume that *everyone* knows certain things when the average person does not. Remove yourself from this influence by imagining the audience you *are* writing for. If it's a third-grade teacher, think about an elementary school teacher you might know, or a parent of a third grader. Imagine how you'd casually explain your project to him or her, keeping the material relevant and basic, without going into greater detail than is necessary. Remember the conversational tone you use to speak with friends, and keep that in your writing.

One nontechnical writer sums it up this way:

> "Really, what I do is not that much different from a common writer technique of having an internal audience... picking one individual whom you know well (friend, family member, etc.) who typifies the audience you're writing for. In this case, choose someone whose technical understanding is around that of the audience you're hoping to reach, and write for that person. In some cases, where my understanding of a subject *is* greater than what I'm aiming for, I'll use my wife as my mental audience, since she has a pretty typical layperson grasp of most topics.

> “As far as specific tips, I would say the main thing is descriptions, descriptions, descriptions. It's hard to go wrong painting a more complete picture of what you're talking about for your audience. And there's a huge difference between this and simply adding more technical detail. There's a fine line but a world of difference between going the extra distance to clarify things, and bogging things down with more arcane stuff.
>
> “A big part of my job is to make topics interesting to people that may previously have had no interest in them. Presenting them like you’re making a technical, academic lecture is not going to help much in that regard. Presenting them like you're telling a friend about this really cool thing you've learned will go a lot further.
>
> “A corollary to that... to thine own self be true. You can write like you're telling a friend about something, but if it's something that you find incredibly boring, then you're not going to get very far. Find what interests you about your subject, and go with it. For example, when I wrote the VASIMR (rocket engine) story, a large part of what I learned was about how the engine would work. But what I found far more interesting is what it could *do!* I didn't ignore the former, I just used them to service the latter: Here's this cool engine that will let us send people to Mars and do all these other things, and here's how it does it. Help the reader find a reason why they should care about what you’re writing.”

[Author’s note: wasn’t that conversational tone much more pleasant to read than a formal paragraph on procedural communication?]

Keep sentences short and words basic

Use the readability indicator: most word processor programs use the Flesch Reading Ease Scale and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Indicator. These guides offer the writer an indication of how readable the writing is. The guides scan the document for the number of words used, number of sentences, and sentences per paragraph, words per sentence, characters per word, passive voice content, and other contributing factors. These all play into an equation that reveals the document’s degree of difficulty. The Flesch Reading Ease scale ranges from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating easier reading. An average document may range anywhere from 6 to 70 on the scale. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade level scale converts the Reading Ease score to a US school-grade level.

American newspapers aim to print articles with an 8^{th} grade reading level. This represents a continuing trend to lower the reading and comprehension levels of the population. In a study of American Presidential speeches, George Washington’s farewell address was presented at a 12^{th} grade reading level, and

FDR's declaration of war speech was written at 11.5. John Kennedy's speeches averaged at 9.6, Nixon's were at 9 and more recently, Bill Clinton's speeches were written at 8.3 grade level. As further proof of the 'dumbing of America,' President George W. Bush's speeches average at just over seventh grade reading levels.

Note: The Flesch-Kincaid Grade level scale rates this document at a 9.5 reading level. Since this is a document aimed at a professional audience, it is hoped that the reader will be able to maneuver this slightly advanced degree of difficulty.

To achieve writing with a lower grade-level readability level, it's important to keep sentences short, using simple, common words. Since the number of syllables per word influences the readability score, use words like "often" instead of 'frequently," and "can" instead of "have the capability of," "use" for "utilize," and "most" instead of "the majority of."

Plain English is always clearer. The Five Cs of business writing apply to nontechnical writing as well.

To be:	Try this:
Clear	Ordinary language
Concise	State points directly, using bulleted lists or charts (such as this)
Concrete	Illustrate ideas with examples
Coherent	Use organized sentences that flow logically
Conversational	Talk to readers as if they are in the room with you

Your audience isn't stupid; merely uneducated

Writing in simple, basic terms isn't the same as talking down to the reader. An excellent example of writing that reflects the reader's intelligence can be found at How Stuff Works, on the Internet at www.howstuffworks.com, where complex machines are described so that anyone can understand how they operate. While explanations are simple and basic, they're not condescending or critical. Short choppy sentences imply that the reader is incapable of understanding longer ones. Sentences with varying length and word order are more respectful (and still meet the requirements of the Flesch-Kincaid readability guide). Precise word choice, rather than vague and general terms, helps the reader zero in on the true intent of the story, rather than waste time with meaningless chatter. The following

chart compares several examples of talking down to readers with examples of simple, precise language.

Talking Down:	Simple phrasing:
Cars are big and fast.	Most cars weigh over 2 tons and can travel at speeds over 60 miles per hour.
Dogs bite.	Dogs may bite when provoked.
The boy fell down and got hurt.	The boy fell off his bike and broke his ankle.

Present the whole story, but only the essential parts

That sounds like a contradiction in terms. If the story is complete, it will contain everything, won't it? Not necessarily so. Remember your audience, and remember your purpose in writing. If the assignment is to write a basic overview for a non-technical audience, a complete story will include elementary information, but not minute detail. Many times, the use of figures and calculations adds to the complexity of an article. Earlier in this tip sheet, if the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level readability formula had been spelled out more specifically, it would have bogged down the reading. Most people reading this document are satisfied to know that the program is built into their word processor, and what factors affect the end score. Going into greater detail would be of interest to a very few readers; the majority would find it confusing to read the following:

> This is a US Government Department of Defense standard test [16].
> (i) Calculate L, the average sentence length (number of words ÷ number of sentences). Estimate the number of sentences to the nearest tenth, where necessary.
> (ii) Calculate N, the average number of syllables per word (number of syllables ÷ number of words).
> Then grade level = (L × 0.39) + (N × 11.8) - 15.59
> So Reading Age = (L × 0.39) + (N × 11.8) - 10.59 years.

It is more efficient and less intimidating to provide a reference where those interested may learn more:
Time Tabler Information can be found at http://www.timetabler.com/reading.html

Tell them you're starting, and know how to stop

The basic article is the primary focus, but don't shortchange the reader by skipping or minimizing an introduction and closing.

An introduction prepares the audience for the material that lies ahead. It lays a foundation and provides a basic guide for what to expect. When the reader is not familiar with the material to be discussed, an introduction helps prevent confusion and distrust. The reader is, after all, trusting that the writer will guide him or her through the document. And just like any tour of unknown places, the best tour guides tell the novice tourist what to expect.

Introductions also compensate for readers who are not reading the entire text. If an article is one in a series, the writer may assume that the reader follows in sequence, but sometimes that isn't the case. An introduction to each phase of a series allows the reader to fill in the gaps created by missed areas.

Conclusions are just as important. Sometimes, though writers are loath to consider it, readers don't actually absorb every word of the article. They skim and gloss over the highlights. Doing so may mean that the audience misses important parts of the material. A conclusion summarizes the essential parts of an article, and if it's a series of articles, leads the reader into the next portion.

By not including a summary as well as an introduction, the writer may defeat his or her own purpose. The goal, after all, is to educate, persuade and even inspire. If the material is lost on the reader, however, the goal is never met.

NASA Portal Style Guidelines
Established by Editorial Board
March, 2004

Captions:

1. Image captions must appear for all images.
2. They should not be longer than the image itself.
3. All captions must begin with either
    a. Image to right:
    b. Image to left:
4. All captions must end with "Credit:" even if the credit just says "Credit: NASA"
5. Side by side images are permitted for comparison purposes. These images are to be placed in a table.

Bylines:

1. Writers may add their names in the **credit** field
2. Format: Name
   NASA's ….. Center
3. NASA Center is to be listed. Writer's name and e-mail address is optional.

Leader Sentences:

1. General Guidelines leader sentences should not be longer than 6 lines for Related Multimedia. Those six lines will include the link line and the promo title.
2. For Feature promo titles/leader sentences we should not be exceeding 4 lines including the link line.
3. "+ Read More" (now the default for detail pages) is to be used for features; "+ View Feature" for images or multimedia

Promo Titles:

1. Excerpt - AP Style Guide:
   Composition titles Capitalize the principal words, including prepositions and conjunctions of four or more letters. Capitalize an article -- *the, a, an* -- or words of fewer than four letters if it is the first or last word in a title.
2. There should be appropriate punctuation at the end of all leader sentences.

General Guidelines:

1. Date is to be included for all feature and/or promotional documents created.
2. Thumbnails are to be 64 x 48 in size and aligned to "bottom."
3. Alt tags should not be the same as the caption.
4. The ampersand should only be used when part of a company's formal name.